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## **Dual Reflections on Teaching and Learning of Autoethnography: Preparing Doctoral Students Authentically for a Career in the Academy**

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Date of publication: October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Edition period: October 2015 - February 2016

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**To cite this article:** Rubinstein-Avila, E., & Maranzana, S. (2015). Dual Reflections on Teaching and Learning of Autoethnography: Preparing Doctoral Students Authentically for a Career in the Academy. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 4(3), 243-268. doi:10.17583/qre.2015.1328

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.2015.1328>

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# Dual Reflections on Teaching and Learning of Autoethnography: Preparing Doctoral Students Authentically for a Career in the Academy

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*(Received: 27 November 2014; Accepted: 13 June 2015; Published: 28 October 2015)*

## Abstract

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This paper conveys the reflections of an instructor and a graduate student after participating in a graduate course on autoethnography, offered in a college of education at a large public research institution in the United States. In addition to the course focus on autoethnography as a qualitative research approach, the course used authentic practices, which are commonly used by academics, to socialize doctoral students from the social sciences to the demands of their future careers in the academy. Although the number of published autoethnography articles in academic journals has increased, few autoethnography courses are being offered, and even fewer are described in the research literature. The authors share their experiences and address their own assumptions, challenges and breakthroughs across practices, including: informal peer-reviews, drafts revisions, and the ongoing composition of a full-length autoethnographic manuscript to be (potentially) submitted for publication, and, thus, shared with a larger audience of readers. The authors call for more explicit and authentic preparation and socialization of social science doctoral students throughout graduate coursework—especially in light of the growing competition for tenure-stream faculty positions across the social sciences and the humanities.

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**Keywords:** autoethnography, graduate student socialization, informal peer-review, writing for publication, authentic pedagogy, higher education

# **Reflexiones Duales sobre la Enseñanza y el Aprendizaje de la Autoetnografía: Preparando Autenticamente para una Carrera en la Universidad**

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*(Recibido: 27 de noviembre de 2014; Aceptado: 13 de junio de 2015; Publicado: 28 de octubre de 2015)*

## **Resumen**

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En este trabajo se exponen las reflexiones de un instructor y un estudiante graduado después de participar en un curso de postgrado sobre autoetnografía, que fue ofrecido en una facultad de educación de una gran institución pública de investigación en los Estados Unidos. Además del enfoque curso sobre autoetnografía como un enfoque de la investigación cualitativa, el curso usó prácticas auténticas, que comúnmente son utilizadas por los académicos, para socializar a los estudiantes de doctorado de ciencias sociales con las demandas de sus futuras carreras académicas. Aunque el número de artículos publicados en revistas científicas sobre autoetnografía ha aumentado, se ofrecen pocos cursos sobre autoetnografía, y aún menos se describen en la literatura de investigación. Los autores comparten sus experiencias y abordan sus propias suposiciones, retos y avances a través de las prácticas, incluyendo: revisiones por pares informales, revisiones de borradores, y la puesta en marcha de un manuscrito autoetnográfico para ser (potencialmente) presentado para su publicación, y, por tanto, compartido con un público más amplio de lectores. Los autores hacen un llamamiento de forma más explícita y auténtica para la preparación y socialización de los estudiantes de doctorado a través de cursos de postgrado, especialmente a la luz de la creciente competencia por obtener plazas de ternure en las facultades de ciencias sociales y las humanidades.

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**Palabras clave:** autoetnografía, socialización de estudiantes graduados, revision por pares informal, escritura para publicar, pedagogía auténtica, educación universitaria

This paper stemmed from a collaborative effort between a course instructor (professor) and a doctoral student to *reflect on action* (Schön, 1983). Both authors come from social science disciplines, and their reflections followed their active participation in a graduate autoethnography course. As Hickson (2011) reminds us, *reflection on action*, as defined by Schön (1983), occurs after an event takes place, when one is able to recall, consider and reconsider one's thoughts and actions. After all, meaning making is more likely to occur retrospectively (Polkinghorne, 1995). This collaboration was inspired by several chapters in an edited volume in which the text alternated between graduate students and advisors—resulting in an engaging, and often enlightening, dialogical exchange (See Minichello & Kottler, 2009). Our shared reflections led us to realize that tackling the demands of the current academic profession in the field of education, while teaching and learning autoethnography, was an eye-opening challenge for us both. Hence, the goal of our paper is two-fold: 1) to share our own experiences, reflections and insights about teaching and learning autoethnography, as instructor and graduate student, and 2) to call for more transparent and explicit preparation of doctoral students in the social sciences, recognizing the increased pressures to write and publish in order to secure, and maintain, a tenure-stream position in an increasingly competitive academic job market.

The word “authentic” and popular terms such as “authentic pedagogy” have been often used in recent years without being operationalized. Our use of the term “authentically”—in our title—is informed by Newman and Associates (1996), whose work led them to claim that there are 3 essential components to an authentic pedagogical context: (1) Student constructed knowledge; (2) Discipline inquiry; and (3) Value beyond school. Expanding somewhat on the authors' original interpretations, to us this means a pedagogical environment that: (a) fosters and elicits students' prior and experiential knowledge as well as student agency; (b) encourages and adopts social supports through structuring substantive conversations (with and among students); (c) incorporates peer reviewing processes to foster deeper engagement with students' knowledge construction; and (d) values and promotes learning that expands beyond classroom walls. In a graduate course this means: making explicit (and tight) connections among the learning objectives, the assessments, students' lives and (professional)

aspirations, expectations and practice, contributing to a particular research literature, and, ultimately, to society at large.

### **Rationale**

Autoethnography, as a qualitative approach, is still not widely accepted across all social science disciplines. In spite of the recent increase in the number of autoethnographies published in peer-reviewed journals and edited books, courses on autoethnography are still uncommon, especially in colleges of education. In fact, the course to which we refer throughout this paper was offered for the first time in our college, which is in a large research oriented university in the Southwest (USA), serving around 40,000 students.

Also, despite the fact that writing for academic publication (and publishing) is now essential for doctoral students seeking tenure-stream academic positions in the U.S.—especially if they intend to secure a position at a reasonably good university, in or near an urban metropolis, how to go about it is often not explicitly addressed in graduate schools (Burgoine et al., 2011; Shulman & Silver, 2005). Burgoine et al. (2011) also note that: “... writing for publication by graduate research students in the humanities and social sciences is almost untouched in higher education, discipline-based and academic-writing research literatures” (p. 463/464). Doctoral programs across various social science disciplines may not be providing students with the types of authentic practices and experiences they need to secure and establish their academic careers. Thus, we join Burgoine et al. (2011) and other scholars (e.g., Adler & Adler, 2005; Burgoine et al., 2011; Wellington, 2010) who call for the explicit socialization of doctoral students to begin early, and to be extended throughout graduate coursework. We believe that early authentic adoption of professional writing and revising practices may advance this agenda.

We, the authors, each had our own motivations to pursue this collaboration. As the course instructor (first author), I viewed this collaboration as an opportunity to reflect with a student on a course that I had just taught for the first time, expanding on my own perspective. Also, as a mentor and advisor, I viewed this collaboration as an authentic mentoring opportunity that might lead to co-authoring and co-publishing. I, the doctoral student (second author) viewed the apprenticeship as an

opportunity into the process of academic co-authoring. Much like Burgoine et al. (2011), I viewed the potential publication of this collaborative piece as the “cherry on the pie.” We both sought to share our storied experiences and reflections with a wider academic audience in the hope that it would be useful, if not insightful, exercise for faculty and graduate students. Throughout the paper we have attempted to make our individual voices clear and explicit, where we saw necessary; however, at times we fuse both our voices as a collaborative “we.”

### **The Art of Autoethnography: Preparing to Take the Autoethnographic Plunge**

#### **Rubinstein-Avila (Professor)**

As the designer and instructor of this graduate course, I felt it was my responsibility to first introduce the students (or remind those who had completed the introductory course in qualitative research methods) to the basic tenets of qualitative research methods, to what Denzin (2013) has recently called the “three main poles”—the right, the left and the social justice poles. I intended to convey to students that their alignment to these poles did not come without responsibilities and/or consequences. In addition, it was essential, in my view, for students to realize early on that qualitative research approaches are informed by theoretical frameworks; they rely on messy, iterative and multiple forms and processes of data collection strategies, analysis and interpretations, during which researchers’ goals are typically not to seek an objective a single truth, but to account for and embrace the multiplicity of human subjectivities and realities (Rubinstein-Avila, 2013). Therefore, early on I encouraged students to consider their positions (personal/social/political) explicitly.

I also encouraged students to consider carefully how autoethnography as an approach for their dissertations would serve their ultimate purposes. This included considering, for example, their potential attractiveness to cash-strapped institutions of higher education, who rely on faculty to bring in large grants to fund their own research, fund doctoral students, and keep their programs functioning. I also clarified that while this issue was essential for them to consider, they were of little, if any, consequence to established tenured<sup>1</sup> faculty, like myself, and, like many senior proponents

of the autoethnographic approach. Herrmann's (2012) article, addressing the potentially traumatic experiences many recent graduates (academic job candidates) face during the job hunt, came to mind.

On day one of the aforementioned course, the graduate students responded to a prompt I provided by describing their view of academic writing in the social sciences: "distant," "jargony," "challenging," "dry," "boring," "flat," "masked," "often undecipherable," "sometimes incomprehensible" and even "overwhelming." These descriptors seemed aligned with Burgoine et al.'s (2011) claims that the process of writing for publication among geography doctoral students was viewed as "... mysterious largely because important aspects of academic writing tend to be ignored, assumed, and/or learned by trial and error in the training to become an academic" (p. 464).

### **Brief Overview of the Autoethnography Course and its Students**

Of the eleven graduate students who registered for the course that Spring semester, most were doctoral students from my own department in the college of education, and a few came from departments throughout the university. Most were full-time students (not so common across graduate programs in education). One student was pursuing an MA in Latin American Studies, another was pursuing an MFA (English department), and Stefano (second author) came from an interdisciplinary program in second language acquisition and teaching. It goes without saying that the students' multidisciplinary backgrounds and interests were invaluable. Student composition was not only diverse by disciplines and topics of interest, but also by national, ethnic, cultural backgrounds, religious affiliations and identities. Consequently, most of us were at least bilingual/biliterate and bicultural.

The course was conducted as a hybrid graduate seminar, and was somewhat aligned with Ellis' (2004) fictionalized text of such a course. The two major written assignments were: 1) a short concept paper, in which students were asked to convey their developmental grasp of what constituted autoethnography, due approximately by mid-semester; 2) a final autoethnographic manuscript, which students began to compose very early on in the course (Ellis, 2004). Much like the intensive writing-for-publication workshop described by Burgoine et al. (2011), students brought

to our weekly class meetings their on-going drafts (different sections of their autoethnographies) for in-class peer-review sessions, which occurred in dyads. The goal of these weekly peer-review sessions, other than providing advice on style, language, formatting, content and suggestions for additional sources, was to elicit peers' gut reactions. Classmates had little, if any, knowledge about each other's topics. Still, the rationale was that readers would potentially identify strengths and weaknesses in each other's texts, and provide each other with useful, or at least thought-provoking, feedback on a weekly basis. After receiving an annotated copy of their short draft from peer-reviewers, and from the instructor, students were expected to incorporate what they felt were the most pertinent recommendations in their next revised drafts.

As a professor/instructor in a college of education within a research institution, I, the first author, agree with Burgoine et al. (2011), who seemed to have captured authentically a popular view among graduate students about academic writing: 1) that some people simply write well and others do not, and 2) that it is a private, solitary, and somewhat mysterious practice. Thus, in order to make the assignment authentic to students' academic socialization, I presented two refereed journals for students to choose from. Both journals published autoethnographic articles. After discussing the characteristics of each journal, students were asked to "study" the journals, i.e., analyze their characteristics and consequently make their selection before mid-semester. The point of this exercise was that writing for a particular audience was essential. While both journals published autoethnographies, we all seemed to agree that the first journal was more open to experimental (i.e., artsy, alternative, edgy) pieces, most of which seemed evocative and loosely structured. The second journal appeared to publish more mainstream, qualitative pieces; the autoethnographies found within its pages seemed to follow a more analytical approach. Once students selected one of the two journals as a potential venue for submission, they were instructed to follow the journal's guidelines for authors (as the course guidelines for the final paper assignment).

Although autoethnography was the main course focus, throughout the course we discussed the intricacies of writing for a broader audience (i.e., academic publication). For example, I highlighted the importance of what I call "studying" a journal (i.e., reading a few of its published articles,



understanding its target audience, discourse and tone), and striving for a successful “match” between one’s manuscript and the journal. Throughout the course, I kept reinforcing that manuscripts were not necessarily “good” or “bad” per se. Instead, we discussed the fate of good manuscripts submitted to the wrong journal—likely resulting in an outright rejection. As the instructor, I was also adamant about introducing the lingo of publications—such as the sought-after R&R (revise and resubmit) decision. To my surprise, most students seemed to think that an R&R was a negative outcome. Although a completed autoethnographic manuscript written for one of two peer-reviewed journals was a course requirement, the actual submission of one’s manuscript to the intended journal after the course was completed was left up to each student.

Students brought slices or segments of their autoethnographies to class on a weekly basis. The idea was for these segments to be integrated later (or not) into one cohesive autoethnography manuscript, at the discretion of the author. We discussed the type of feedback that would be effective for revising, and the importance of providing detailed constructive criticism to yield a clearer, more contextualized, readable, and potentially more insightful piece. We discussed issues such as the need to offer readers layered context. As the instructor, I also provided feedback along the way, highlighting the importance of comprehensibility, focus, voice, evocativeness, flow, and how multiple registers and discourses can be integrated for varying purposes. Throughout the course students were also reminded by the several authors we read that making connections with the larger cultural world was crucial to the intent of autoethnographic projects (Ellis, 2004).

The topics students chose to address for their autoethnographic manuscript ranged from the very personal, as is often the case with autoethnographies, to topics that straddled the professional and the personal realm. For example, one student chose to reflect on her meandering career path leading to the doctorate program; another student chose to examine and gain a layered understanding of her family’s dysfunctions. One student delved into his ideological and emotional ambivalence toward working in law enforcement, while another student crafted her autoethnography around her own developing proficiency of her ancestral Indigenous language (as an adult), within the context of her academic work on Indigenous language revitalization efforts.

## Grasping Autoethnography Conceptually

### Rubinstein-Avila

I expected the first short concept paper (5-page + references), due about a week after the mid-semester point, would provide students an opportunity to grapple with their emergent meaning making of autoethnography. Based on the wide range of course readings, I suggested that students try to make sense of autoethnography's potential for multimodality, multivocality and the array of purposes and intentions it serves. While some students focused on summarizing or comparing and contrasting the readings, several conveyed their evolving ontological views and shifts. I emphasized that the paper did not need to follow a linear or stable understanding of autoethnography. Rather, I suggested that students explore the multiple approaches of the autoethnographic genre. I encouraged students to embrace and articulate their confusions, misgivings, interpretations, and the challenges they may have encountered as they tried to wrap their heads around this rather rhizomatic, qualitative approach.

### Maranzana (Doctoral Student)

Before taking this autoethnography course, I had never heard the term autoethnography. For the concept paper assignment, I started by acknowledging that there is no consensus as to what autoethnography is, as various authors have understood this approach in different ways. What I also found fascinating was that as soon as I felt I could begin to define autoethnography, I would read a piece that added a new layer of complexity to my attempt to define it. The power of this genre to engage the reader viscerally, to suck the reader right into the story, and convey the author's own message—like a dart—captivated me. For example, Kiesinger's (2002) autoethnographic piece on the abominable topic of incest, conveyed in a complex, sensitive, even unexpectedly humanizing way, through what she called "narrative reframing," intrigued many of us. Mizzi's (2010) use of Bakhtin's (1986) concept of *multivocality* to enhance and develop autoethnographic subjectivities was enthralling to me. Mizzi argues that "voice" is [not] linear, categorizable, and one-dimensional ..." (Mizzi

2010, p. 1), but instead a plurality of inner expressions of oneself, that may differ at various points—even at times contradicting each other.

As the various readings for this course conveyed, autoethnographers' engagement with the approach stemmed from their particular disciplinary training as well as their own interpretations of the genre. Ultimately their purposes and the audiences they intended to address also played important roles. Indeed, the diversity of topics and styles across the ethnographic readings mirrored, and sometimes disrupted, the tension between two autoethnographic strands—the *evocative* and *analytical* (Anderson, 2006a, 2006b; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

## Challenges to Teaching & Learning Autoethnography

### Rubinstein-Avila

As the instructor I anticipated a few main challenges: the first was to help students grasp the illusion of research “objectivity,” also discussed in Ellis (2004) and Wall (2006). The second anticipated challenge was to help students embrace their multiple subjectivities; the third, to support them as they turned the research lens 180 degrees—onto themselves, a maneuver other scholars found to be problematic (Ellis, 2004; Wall, 2006). For students to focus inward and reposition themselves within the center of their research requires a radical paradigm shift (Ellis, 2004; Wall 2006). In fact, one student, who was unable to turn the lens and insisted on composing an ethnography, later dropped out. Students who held on to notions of objectivity for dear life struggled a great deal more. By grappling with such questions, students eventually came to realize that autoethnography not only required them to incorporate their subjectivities into their work, but also to engage with the dynamic relationship between self and the larger cultural world.

This conceptual shift clashed with the positivist paradigm, with which many graduate students in the social sciences are more familiar, and even uphold (consciously or not). Laverly's (2008) article, one of our first readings, acknowledges the ontological belief in multiple realities, and claims that such realities may be altered by the knower as they “are not more or less true” but, rather “... more or less informed” (p. 26). The article was accessible to some students, but not to all. The hermeneutic

phenomenology postulation, that reality is perceived by each individual through the interpretation of his or her own experience and background or *historicity* (Laverty, 2008), can be one of the most challenging aspects of teaching and learning qualitative research, and especially autoethnography. Over time, Laverty's (2008) piece did come to resonate with students, at various levels, as the author called attention to "discovery, description and meaning rather than prediction, control and measurement" (p. 21). While not all students were ready to articulate their ontological shifts, all ten remaining students leaped rather comfortably into their new role as the primary object of their own studies.

Another challenge, albeit not a major one among that particular group of students, was countering the prevalent belief that social science students cannot write creatively (Ellis, 2004; Seelig, 2012). In her book, Seelig (2012), who teaches about creativity and innovation at Stanford's School of Engineering, says that people tend to believe that creativity is a fixed entity—"like eye color" (p. 10). "They think that if they aren't currently creative, there is no way to increase their ability to come up with innovative ideas" (p. 10). As Seelig (2012) puts it, "creative thinking" (and by extension, creative writing) requires a different "[...] complimentary set of tools and techniques" (p. 10). Ellis (2004) claimed that graduate students in the social sciences have not typically had the chance or the disciplinary motivation to develop their creative writing. As Seelig (2012) succinctly puts it: while discovery (scientific method) and invention (creativity) may be completely different endeavors, they nevertheless "[...] work in concert" (p. 10). Eventually, my students came to approach analytical autoethnography (Anderson 2006a) and evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) as a continuum (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010), more as dialectic (Mitra, 2010) than a binary issue. Some students gravitated more toward one approach, while others fashioned a more or less seamless braid of both approaches.

## Composing the Autoethnographic Manuscript—the Authentic Final Assignment

### Maranzana

The first topic that came to my mind (during week 2 of the course) for my autoethnography manuscript was the exploration of my journey of becoming a father. I seized the opportunity to attempt to make sense of my *coming into fatherhood* in light of my recent separation from my wife, which resulted in the break-up of the family. I felt that fatherhood was a subject I could connect to through soul searching. Also, although the topic seemed to pale in comparison to the more popular topic of coming into motherhood, I hoped to engage in soul searching and contribute something to the larger cultural world. Ultimately, I felt a need to recount and relive the amazing experience of my daughter's home-birth, and the process that led to it. Although the mother plays the leading role in giving birth to another human, becoming a father is indeed a challenging and complex turning point in a man's life, and I was eager to explore my own "social construction of fatherhood" (Johansson, 2011, p. 165).

In conducting the background research for my own autoethnography, I had the chance to delve into the topic not only from a purely personal stance, but also from a scholarly one. I was fascinated with the social and cultural changes in the roles of fatherhood and conceptions of masculinity in Western society, over the last few decades (Williams, 2008). Just as one of my classmates, a dancer and an art educator, likened the process of writing her autoethnography to choreographing a dance, I experienced something similar. As a composer, I felt that creating my autoethnography shared elements with composing a new song. There are many layers involved in crafting a song: chord progressions, melodies, lyrics and the process of arranging the various instruments. Similarly, throughout the autoethnography course, we were directed to focus on specific sections of the paper that would ultimately be merged, like a patched quilt or a layered cake. Toward the end of the semester, I was able to massage and integrate the various sections I had composed into one coherent manuscript. The process allowed me the opportunity to practice professional writing (for publication) with the professor's guidance as well as classmates' feedback throughout. This process also avoided the painful end-of-term scramble to

compose a twenty-plus page paper in just a few days. In addition, it drove home the point that writing for a wider audience is a long-term project that requires a great deal of time and energy to research, write, reflect upon, incorporate feedback, revise, often rewrite and even recreate.

Throughout the course we were frequently reminded by Dr. Rubinstein-Avila (Dr. R-A) to keep in mind our target audience and the peer-reviewed journal we had selected for potential submission. Composing the paper for a particular journal, at least for me, added a new layer of stress. On the other hand, it bestowed a greater sense of purpose to this ongoing final course assignment. My efforts went beyond proving my academic competencies to my professor in exchange for a grade. Instead, I tried my best to compose a product that could undergo the scrutiny of blind reviewers, and hopefully be read by other scholars. I felt an agentic surge at the prospect of becoming the sole author of a paper in an academic, peer-reviewed journal.

The ongoing peer reviews and the feedback from Dr. R-A were essential to the revisions and eventual completion of my final autoethnographic manuscript assignment. Although it took me a while to realize that receiving feedback from other graduate students could be effective, it eventually dawned on me that their multiple perspectives were invaluable. I could certainly relate to Cho and MacArthur's (2010) assertion that peers' comments can be at times easier to grasp and employ than those from an expert, because peers are more likely to share similar problems and discourse. Before this class my experience with peer-review consisted of sending a draft to a friend or to my father-in-law (a former academic) for anything that needed "fixing"—mainly grammatical issues. As a non-native speaker of English, I have always been self-conscious about my academic writing in English. This new and broader dimension of the peer-reviewing practice was definitely an eye-opening experience.

Overall, the integration of feedback (from peers and from Dr. R-A) into my various drafts helped me reflect on several aspects of my own writing. As a matter of practice, I read and revised what I had written every week. Although criticism of one's own work is at times challenging to acknowledge and accept, my colleagues' comments were often helpful, sometimes even insightful, and generally considerate. They pointed out strengths and weaknesses in my manuscript in (mostly) constructive ways. For instance, a classmate encouraged my stylistic approach in conveying surprise as I learned of my wife's pregnancy: "I like the bottom of the first

page. You have a strong transition that shocks the reader. Keep this [...] Page 5: Can you do a shock effect like you did on the first page? Page 6: I like the explicit use of your autoethnographic voice here” (Notes from JT, Peer-reviewer).

Since this was my first attempt at composing a scholarly paper that blended social science research literature with creative writing, I felt reassured that my peers were able to make sense of my own application of Van Maanen’s (1998) *impressionistic tale*. Indeed, I was enthralled with the opportunity to narrate events employing dramatic recall. As Van Maanen (1998) argued, the work assumes a novelistic atmosphere, when the characters at play are given real names and “lines to speak.” The unfolding of this type of narrative gives the reader a sense of “being there,” an awareness of a certain dramatic tension building up and then releasing. I was glad to hear from my peers that my novelistic style engaged them, as JT observed. Other peers, however, were more abrupt in their reactions. In fact, the same stylistic device that earned JT’s praise was sharply rejected by CT, another peer-reviewer, who also challenged other sections of my autoethnographic draft:

[...], although this is an autoethnography, I feel you are occasionally becoming too chummy with the reader. . . such as, "Wait a minute!" Good transition from your initial story to the cited literature. However, the transition in the same paragraph, from how to take care of your pregnant wife to the homebirth in Italy is awkward. Interesting info about maternity leave, but it seems out of place within your general narrative. (Notes from CL, a peer-reviewer)

Eventually, I decided to keep the “chummy” tone in the final manuscript, but I did smooth out the transitions, as suggested by CL, and I also decided to pare down particular topics that may have been detractors to the overall objective of the piece. As Dr. R-A reiterated in class, the purpose of peer-reviewing is to provide authors with productive critique and suggestions to expand one’s work; however, it is ultimately the author’s decision to accept the feedback (or not) and revise (or not) accordingly. I was surprised to spend a great deal of time trying to determine whether or not to incorporate particular recommendations. I realized that in order to

identify which comments to accept and which ones to reject, I needed to take on a certain degree of maturity. At first, I lacked the confidence to make such determinations. I took some of the comments personally, despite Dr. R-A's advice to "never let that happen," because it led us to "falling into the ego trap." By about mid-semester, I found myself feeling more confident as an author and as a scholar. Within a couple of months I was able to read the feedback I received from peers and Dr. R-A as an intellectual issue to be solved—not an emotional hump to get over. Although the peer-review process was occasionally unsettling, due mostly to contradictory observations or to (what I may have perceived as) unforgiving critique, in general I concur with Wager, Godlee, and Jefferson (2002) that the ongoing practice of peer-reviewing enriched my final draft, and was, in the end, gratifying.

Also, the more I read and reviewed my classmates' drafts, the more I noticed the same practice in their work as well. It became evident to me that as authors, we cannot assume that our readers share our experiences or our worldviews. We must provide enough context to allow for readers' own meaning making. However, there is always the risk of providing too much context. Trying to find that balance between my explicit personal experiences as a new father, and the role of fatherhood in contemporary Western society was a challenging process. I also realized that in spite of the most thorough proofreading, we are likely to miss issues that are detectable only by a different pair of eyes. In sum, I appreciated the value of my peers' input, and felt invigorated by the opportunity to contribute to somebody else's work. Not only were we engaging in an authentic scholarly practice (Armstrong, 1997), but we were also crafting a product that could potentially be shared with a wider audience of scholars—not solely the professor.

### **Rubinstein-Avila**

At first, students were highly skeptical of the weekly peer-review and revision task. I suspected that this was because the assignment would be graded. Their lack of enthusiasm for the task may have been a result of the uneven quality of peer feedback. Although I did provide guidelines, the scaffolding may not have been sufficient. The main challenge graduate students may face with the continuous peer-reviewing process is a lack of



confidence in their own knowledge and research skills. Students often expressed that they did not feel they “knew enough” (in their own words) to be able to provide helpful feedback to others. In fact, such insecurity was also mirrored in reverse when students tried to assess the feedback from their peers. Students were likely to find themselves asking: should I heed my peers’ feedback and revise accordingly? Why should I assume that my peers know more than I do? Another aspect of peer reviewing that graduate students may find challenging to overcome, especially in highly competitive programs, is the fear of sharing new ideas with classmates. Students may fear that classmates could “borrow” their ideas (without crediting them) before the piece was published. However, I did not come across this in the graduate courses I have taught.

With the exclusion of the creative non-fiction MFA student, and one other student who had taken a previous course with me on approaches to qualitative research, the peer-reviewing and revising task was new to the students in the course. Nevertheless, apart from a student who claimed that peer-input only hindered her creativity, all the others expressed that the process was an eye-opening experience. In fact, about three quarters of the way into the semester, students shared that they overcame initial fears of not being experienced enough to provide helpful or effective feedback to peers. Most students reported that reading their own work through the lens of others had deepened their thinking and fortified their writing. Students also embraced the opportunity to compose feedback that would be meaningful and useful to others.

I noticed that the quality of the peer feedback slowly evolved. While at first the bulk of peer comments focused on clarification questions, and grammatical/mechanical corrections, they soon became more discerning and sophisticated. For example, students began to “demand” more in-depth reflections from each other, request explanations about implicit research ideologies, suggest greater connections to the larger social world, and recommend various course readings to support or expand on peers’ points or arguments. As the peer-reviews became a systematic practice throughout the course, I had greater leeway to make comments without fear of bruising students’ self-esteem. Once students became accustomed to receiving and giving feedback, their manuscripts also evolved into more professional pieces. Students began to take more risks; their writing became more evocative, and their connections to societal issues were more explicit and

effective. As the end of the semester neared, students' efforts to reach a broader audience became more intentional.

A few memorable highlights occurred for me toward the end of the semester. One was when the only MA student in the class informed me that the manuscript he had been composing throughout the course had become instrumental to his MA thesis defense. He had grappled with the integration of his diary, in which he detailed his experiences and personal feelings as a law-enforcer, with literature reviews he had composed for prior courses. He claimed that the autoethnography course had helped him combine the "evocative" and the "analytical" (Anderson, 2006b) in ways he had not envisioned before. He also expressed feeling empowered by his ability to defend persuasively the rationale for his autoethnographic MA thesis to his committee members—some of whom had initially been skeptical. Another highlight occurred when a student, who in a previous course struggled with what she called the "dryness" and "distance" of the academic genre, said that she finally felt that she had been "[...] able to blossom through the use of the evocative autoethnographic style." In the past she deemed this style "too flowery for the academy."

I believe that most, if not all, the students in that course took home a new or deeper understanding of subjectivities and the blending of genres in the process of writing for a broader audience. Students' exposure to multiple genres (some of which were unknown to them), largely disrupted the view that academic writing meant mastering a single, monolithic academic discourse or genre (Canagarajah, 2006). The students' final manuscripts conveyed their willingness to embrace their own subjectivities and vulnerabilities into their autoethnographies. They were able to make deeper personal and societal connections, and develop identities as researchers and authors (Pearce, 2010).

### **Discussion: Thoughts, Reflections, Doubts, Realizations and Implications**

#### **Maranzana**

In my discipline, applied linguistics and foreign language teaching, scholars are typically expected to maintain a concise, detached, and specialized discourse; there is little room for personal, evocative unfoldings—much

less for conversational tone. Can an autoethnographic approach be suitable to applied linguistic research? I now would argue that autoethnography can be suitable within the context of applied linguistics and second language acquisition. For example, a scholar could explore her/his own attempt to make meaning of the language acquisition and development process through reflexive lenses. A vivid, evocative narrative of one’s linguistic journey, including struggles, road bumps, and triumphs toward the mastery of an additional language would be more likely to resonate with readers than a “neutral, impersonal, and objective stance” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, p. 2). In fact, as an individual who has acquired and developed two foreign languages as an adult, I look forward to one day embarking on such an autoethnographic project.

In addition to my new knowledge of autoethnography, and the insights I gained from the peer review process, I am also armed with a broader knowledge of the professional field I am about to enter. Since classroom discussions were contextualized within the realm of the academy, this new knowledge included: searching for appropriate venues for disseminating one’s work, impact factors, and acceptance rates—topics that were mostly new and extremely valuable to me. Another topic I had not heard being discussed openly in my other graduate courses was the required (but rarely explicitly stated) letter to the editor that accompanies an R&R (revise & resubmit) decision, detailing the author’s revisions and/or rationale for not following a particular suggestion. I also found discussions about the delicate, strategic, and, sometimes, ethical decisions authors often are faced to make—such as what or how much to revise—invaluable. It was as if the word *Abracadabra* had been invoked, and that as a result a door into the magical academic world (Shulman & Silver, 2005), about which I seemed to know so little, had been opened.

### **Rubinstein-Avila**

Toward the end of the course, I felt that students had helped each other expand their horizons; indeed, several had pushed me to see things in a new light. For example, the MFA student, who firmly resisted my suggestions to structure sections of her manuscript into smaller segments, submitted an engaging and effective holistic weaving of fictional and non-fictional discourse, interspersed with short media messages (in a different font) with

the intent to signal the changes in topic, context and mood. Following my students' compositional processes closely, especially after we read Behar's (1996) text, allowed me to embrace my own vulnerabilities as an instructor and mentor, and to remind myself of the delights associated with being a perpetual student and engaged scholar.

In order to embrace autoethnography, most emerging scholars in the social sciences must undergo paradigmatic shifts (Ellis, 2004). Bridging the personal with the social (the micro and macro), and integrating a variety of discourses and genres is challenging and requires a great deal of practice. The socialization of graduate students into the "academic arena" (a phrase which is redolent of gladiatorial combat) ought to be discussed openly and explicitly with graduate students. Students should not be spared the tough realities of the academic job market. In fact, they should be made aware of the demands and pressures associated with certain types of positions and institutions. Therefore, more graduate courses ought to integrate content with the professional practices that will be expected from doctoral students in the social sciences and humanities following graduation.

What would I change the next time around? I will definitely devote more time and energy to the composition of relevant and effective abstracts. What drew my attention initially to Burgoine et al.'s (2011) article was its clever title. It is possible that many of us have forgotten how challenging it was early on in our careers to compose a relevant, let alone a catchy, abstract. Another topic I hope to focus on is collaborative autoethnographic research (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2012). I also plan to pay greater attention to the roles and responsibilities of co-authorship, which are detailed in the Vancouver Protocol (Burgoine et al., 2011). Although co-authors' roles ought to be discussed between collaborators on a case-by-case basis, ideally throughout the collaboration process, the protocol provides helpful guidelines. Lastly, I hope to be more flexible and listen even more intently to my students' ideas.

## **Maranzana**

I admit that before enrolling in this class I tended to view academic writing as a single, narrow, and very particular genre. I even admit that I used to believe that researchers had to remain completely objective. As the course progressed, I realized I had been grossly overgeneralizing. The

autoethnography course has contributed to my broader understanding of researchers' subjectivities, and what counts as qualitative research. It is also clearer to me that writing for a broader academic audience is an expertise that develops over time and calls for critical feedback from others. The autoethnography course also cracked an opening for me into the "black hole" of the academic world. Although my doctoral program requires that all second-year doctoral students take part in a two-day workshop led by two professors (the first day focuses on the dissertation proposal; the second is devoted to academic publishing), there is a limit to how much can be conveyed and assimilated during such a short period of time. Since I hope to secure a tenure-stream position after graduation, the authentic hands-on practice of the academic writing and publishing processes was extremely relevant and useful to me.

I was baffled (and I believe I may not have been the only one) to learn about the span of time, effort, skill and patience entailed in the process of writing for publication—from initial composition to (possibly) publication—especially as one is competing for dwindling tenure-stream positions or is under the publication pressures commonly associated with the ticking 'tenure clock.' As a third-year doctoral student, I wondered why such secrets were rarely discussed in the doctoral level courses.

Adler and Adler (2005) argued that symbolic interactionists view professionalization as a development by which apprentices progress into the identity of the professional, but admitted that across the social sciences and the humanities the path into professional socialization is unclear, and not as explicit as it may be for the neophyte (hard) scientist, who most often is part of a research team. In fact, Adler and Adler (2005) claimed that "sociologists have rarely shone the light on themselves to analyze how neophyte practitioners become transformed into seasoned professionals" (p. 11). I also identified with their assertion that as graduate students our transition—from "consumer[s] of information" to "producers of information" (Adler & Adler, 2005, p. 19; see also Gardner, 2008) is a challenging one. At the end of the autoethnography course, I felt that I was achieving a better balance within the consumer/producer of knowledge continuum.

Shortly after the autoethnography course was over, Dr. R-A, who also happens to be my dissertation chair and advisor, invited me to co-author this piece about our experiences and reflections on the course. At first, I

was elated. However, even after we met to plan and discuss first and second authorship, I still felt unsure about my role in the process. Therefore, I waited for very explicit directions or instructions from her, much like a student would wait for the guidelines to complete a course assignment. Dr. R-A, however, insisted that I take more initiative; she suggested I contributed my experiences, thoughts, reflections, intentions, as well as any possible trepidations and breakthroughs I may have experienced throughout the course. She stressed that being a co-author meant being an “agentic contributor.” She added that she also expected me to critique her contributions. She did not mince words: “Stick your neck out!” “Take charge!” “Be critical!” She also suggested that I “follow [my] ideas and [my] heart—revise later.” She also reassured me that “we were in this together.” I later found a quote in Gardner’s (2008) work that especially resonated with my new role as a co-reflector and co-author. The quote seemed to encapsulate a conundrum, probably experienced by other graduate students: “If someone holds your hand too much you’ll never learn to think for yourself, and if someone doesn’t hold your hand enough you’ll fall flat on your face” (Gardner, 2008, p. 327).

For me, the gradual shift from graduate student to scholar and budding academic professional began to occur as I presented my work in conferences and as I composed my autoethnographic manuscript. This shift has been further solidified through my role as co-author of this paper. Although my dissertation will not be autoethnographic, my journey into autoethnography, and the immersion into the world of academic scholarship, has made me a much more *vulnerable* observer, scholar and researcher (Behar, 1996).

### **Maranzana and Rubinstein-Avila**

We realize that most doctoral students in the social science disciplines are not likely to craft an autoethnographic dissertation; however, we strongly believe that the vulnerability researchers gain from weaving their own experiences, reflections, ideologies, and subjectivities with larger societal issues, are likely to lead to what Behar (1996) calls an “irrevocable journey” (p. 2). We realize that we are not alone in our call for more authentic professional writing opportunities for doctoral students throughout their graduate programs. Wellington (2010), for example,

suggested that peer critique should be institutionalized in programs identified as “research training.” He proposed that graduate students should be provided with opportunities to practice scrutinizing and appraising scholarly work not only for its content, but also for “[...] the structure, the signposting, the ‘introducing and concluding’, the clarity of sentences, the exegesis of the literature, the criticality, the cogency of arguments, and the claims and recommendations made” (Wellington, 2010, p. 148). In sum, we contend that doctoral level courses ought to socialize graduate students authentically into the multiplicity of research dissemination opportunities. It is time to demystify the magical path to the scholarly profession—a course on autoethnography with a focus on authentic academic writing (and continuous peer-reviewing) has the potential to accomplish both goals.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tenure in essence is a permanent faculty job contract in the American university system. Tenure-track faculty positions entail a probationary period of six years, followed by a lengthy peer-review process by several committees within the university to determine tenure eligibility. At smaller 4-year colleges, tenure is often determined by the faculty’s teaching ability, service activities and academic publication record (to a lesser extent). At larger research universities the tenure decision is based heavily on the individual’s ability to secure large grants and publish their work in peer-reviewed academic journals (or books). The process is not transparent and can be highly political.

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